

Begin Again in Love Sunday  
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Good morning. That responsive reading was a bit heavy to start of the morning, but I think that this time of year can be heavy for a lot of us, and I wanted to share it up front to set the stage for what I am going to talk about.

Tomorrow is new years eve, a time when many of us look back over the year, taking stock of how it went, the highlights, and not so highlights, remembering people that have come into our lives, and also remembering those that have left. We might recall big milestones, a change in our working life, or moving to a new home, and we might recall smaller moments, a beautiful sunset, laughing at a favorite tv show. And we look toward the coming year as a clean slate, an opportunity to start a fresh with goals and commitments to be, in some way, better. But the reality is that the start of a new year does not wipe our slates clean on its own, that is something we can choose to do though.

I think of a year as a circle. You could even imagine one of the rollercoasters that does a full loop-dee-loop, and this mid winter is the top of the circle, where for a moment there is a brief hang time before we plunge into the next year. I invite us to sit in this time, as most holidays draw to a close, and before the tumbling into 2019, to pause and reflect on how we can live into our potential, our values, a bit more in the next 365 days.

Another word that gets used this time of year is intention. It is a gentler way of saying goal or resolution. We might set the intention to be proactive about our health, or the intention to be better to the earth, or the intention to be a kinder person, but without some sort of action these intentions will never blossom.

I'd like to look at another way we use the the word intention - especially in UU context - we talk about assuming good intentions. When we say this, we mean, when someone says something that doesn't land well, we are to assume that they meant well, even if their comments or actions were misguided.

The following is from an article entitled, "Intent vs Impact: why your intentions don't really matter" by Jamie Utt. Imagine for a moment that you're standing with your friends in a park, enjoying a nice summer day. You don't know me, but I walk right up to you holding a Frisbee. I wind up – and throw the disc *right into your face*. Understandably, you are indignant. Through a bloody nose, you use a few choice words to ask me what the hell I thought I was doing. And my response? "*Oh, I didn't mean to hit you! That was never my intent! I was simply trying to throw the Frisbee to my friend over there!*" Visibly upset, you demand an apology. But I refuse. Or worse, I offer an apology that sounds like "*I'm sorry your face got in the way of my Frisbee! I never intended to hit you.*" While it might be helpful in the heat of the moment to assume good intentions - that I did not intend to hit you in the face with my frisbee - it does not change the fact that your face is in pain.

Here's another example. A few years ago I was out having tea with a friend. She was going through a really rough time and had recently lost her father. Along with this her relationship was on the rocks and her work life wasn't great. She told me that she was suffering from depression and was barely eating. She had lost a significant amount of weight due to her grief, stress, and depression. As we were talking, a mutual acquaintance we hadn't seen in a while came into the shop. She saw us and came over to say hi. She turned to my friend and said, "wow, you look great! I remember you being much heavier, but you look really good now, whatever you're doing is working. I wish I could lose a few pounds myself!" Now obviously this acquaintance had good intentions. However, that did not make my friend feel any better. Instead she said it only made her feel worse. It was as if the woman had said, "Sorry you're dad died and your life if falling

apart, at least you look good!” As if looking “good” was all that mattered, and that thinness meant goodness.

I don’t want to suggest we throw out assuming good intention completely, but it cannot stop there. It is too easy for this idea to relieve someone of the responsibility for their actions, and it puts the weight of the interaction on the person who has been harmed. While it may lessen my hurt to know something was accidental instead of intentional, there needs to be another step taken by the person doing the harm. If we simply leave it at, well you didn’t mean to throw that frisbee in my face, it does nothing to prevent the same thing from happening again.

I’m sure most of us can think of a time when someone has said or done something with best intention, only to leave us feeling hurt, or rejected. And the less privileged we have, the more often we encounter this, and the heavier it hits. The sexist joke in the office, the racist comment at a family gathering - the excuses, “I didn’t mean to...” “It wasn’t my intent...” “I’m not a racist, sexist, ect...”

Rev. Eller-Isaacs, the author of the responsive reading has said that he originally wrote it in the first person, which gives it a much different power (“I forgive myself and others, and begin again in love”). That version was deemed too intimate for our hymnal, where it was changed from first person singular to the “we” of first person plural. And this, what I’ve been talking about, intent and impact, can feel very personal. When we are on the side of making the mistake, it is safe to try and hide behind intent, because if we don’t, what does it mean about us? Do we/I become the bad guy? I can tell you, I know that is not a comfortable place. I remember being at seminary and that we weren’t going to get an extension on a paper a lot of my class had been hoping for. I muttered, “ugh, that’s so lame.” A classmate turned to me and let me know, very kindly, that the word “lame” used the way I did was hurtful to people with disabilities. I can remember my gut reaction, wanting to assure her I did not mean it, I care about all people, I’m a good UU, and a good person. She let me know, firmly, but again kindly, that I had work to do on my language and that was that.

I have learned since then to separate the “what I did” from “what I am.” I am by no means an expert at it, I am after all, only human. But it is something that can help me in the moments when I feel my defensiveness rising. I may not be able to change who I am at my core, but I can certainly work on changing what I do. Humans make mistakes. And this might shock and sadden some of you, but perfection is not achievable. And that’s ok. What’s not ok is refusing to acknowledge our shortcomings so that we don’t have to face hard feelings. When someone is brave enough to bring to our attention ways in which our words and/or actions hurt others, focusing on what you did, instead of what you are, is a helpful way to move from defensiveness to humility.

When I first chose that reading as the inspiration for today’s sermon, I only knew it by its refrain - we begin again in love, not by its title, Litany of Atonement. However, atonement is a good word to use on the cusp of a new Year. In Jewish tradition, God inscribes each person's fate for the coming year into the [Book of Life](#), on [Rosh Hashanah](#)- the first day of the new year, and waits until Yom Kippur - the day of atonement - to "seal" the verdict. During this time Jewish people try to amend their behavior and seek forgiveness for wrongs done against God and against other human beings. The evening and day of Yom Kippur are set aside for public and private petitions and confessions of guilt. The religious concept of atonement means reparations for sin. Now I know sin is not a common word amongst UUs. I was taught by a UU theology professor to think about sin as anything that separates us from God. And to push that a bit further, I would suggest one of the ways UUs often understand “God” or holiness - something that is bigger than us - is beloved community. God might also be nature, or balance. So we could think of sin as anything that keeps us separate from each other, from community, from the earth, from love and life.

Let us return to the moment of pause at the top of the roller coaster loop. We are being given the chance to start again, an opportunity to look back over that last year, and forward into the next. And what a perfect time to

consider this idea of atonement. So what might UU atonement look like? Rev. Eller-Isaacs offers us the idea that we should forgive ourselves and each other, and begin again in love. And in Jamie Utt's article I previously referenced, he says, "When we are told that the impact of our action, inaction, or words is hurtful and furthers oppression, we can start by apologizing *without any caveats*. From there, we can spend the time to reflect in hopes of gaining at least some understanding (*however marginal*) of the harmful impact. And we can do our best to move forward by acting more accountably."

He boils this down to, "Listen, Reflect, Apologize, Do Better." And I think that is a perfect way to implement what it means to begin again in love.